

**UNO Teacher Scholars Academy:  
Program Evaluation**

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**Abstract**

The demand for highly-qualified educators is on the rise as teacher retention rates continue to decline. The current realities of the teacher pipeline are cause for concern for university teacher preparation programs and various stakeholders. This qualitative program evaluation examines a Teacher Scholars Academy (TSA) scholarship program at a Midwestern university that focuses on elevating teacher qualifications through additional required courses, seminars, and activities to develop a highly-qualified pool of teacher candidates. With opportunities to engage with local school districts and community leaders, the goal is to increase teacher candidates' longevity in the field of education and to retain talented professionals within the state. The purpose of this study is to analyze focus group and survey responses from the first TSA cohort group to identify how the scholarship program impacted these teacher candidates. Findings reveal that participants discern value in the TSA-required courses, interpersonal support networks, and professional development opportunities.

## **Introduction**

The Teacher Scholars Academy Program aims to recruit and retain the best and brightest high school seniors. Since its inception in 2019, the Teacher Scholars Academy (TSA) goals are to promote the teaching field as an appealing career choice to highly qualified individuals and affirm the view of Nebraska as the best place in the nation to be a teacher. In addition, the University of Nebraska at Omaha College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences (CEHHS) seeks to increase the diversity of the teaching workforce and provide incoming educators with the capacity to improve learning outcomes for all students. The TSA Program strives:

- To support teacher development to serve diverse populations and communities.
- To foster teacher development in hard-to-fill endorsement areas.
- To improve the retention rates of new teachers.
- To promote leadership development and professional growth.
- To provide opportunities for collaborative research and scholarly work in education.
- To provide community and global experience opportunities to enrich candidates' intellectual, professional, and interpersonal growth.

TSA Teacher Scholars progress as a designated cohort group. These cohorts experience specially curated learning opportunities that correspond with UNO College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences courses. Teacher Scholars complete dedicated TSA Honors courses like Communication Studies, Human Relations for Bias-Free Classrooms, and Foundation of Leadership Development. Each year, Teacher Scholars participate in Leadership through Action seminar series where they engage with educational community leaders through professional growth and development. These enrichment opportunities include guest lectures, volunteer work, service to the community, seminars, and social events designed to increase scholars' engagement

and skills. Scholars partake in experiential learning activities in local schools and classrooms so scholars can hone their teaching skills under the tutelage of experienced teachers before graduation.

The purpose of this program evaluation is to synthesize the experiences of the Teacher Scholars to identify the outcomes and impacts of the UNO Teacher Scholars Academy. The program evaluation is conducted through the lens of Teacher Scholars who have completed all four years of the scholarship program. Teacher Scholars shared personal experiences are used to identify themes, value adds, and opportunities for growth in the Teacher Scholars Academy program.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Elevate Skills***

The need for highly qualified teachers has been a topic of concern for decades. Simply put, there is a direct correlation between a teacher's proficiency level and students' academic achievements. There is a national need for universities to advance and prompt the field of education to recruit and retain talented teacher candidates. To extend learning beyond typical teacher preparation, it is beneficial for local leaders and educational stakeholders to create a cohesive and shared vision to ensure the needs of the local community are realized (Cavanna et al., 2021). Courses, seminars, and activities should build off one another providing teacher candidates with a clear pathway to actualizing the program's vision. This includes intentionally providing opportunities for teacher candidates to reflect on the practice of teaching while educating them on the resources available to them (Beswick & Fraser, 2019). Practicum experiences that allow teacher candidates to experience the realities of teaching and provide

opportunities for them to implement theoretical knowledge can be both empowering and enriching experiences (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). This is because teacher candidates will establish a network that will expand beyond the university system and increase awareness of local resources that they can integrate into their future classrooms (Beswick & Fraser, 2019).

Establishing strong foundational knowledge in teacher candidates is multifaceted and includes core content knowledge, problem-solving, and critical thinking along with cultural competencies, ethical/emotional awareness, communication and collaboration skills, and digital literacy (Beswick & Fraser, 2019). Teacher Scholars Academy courses build upon traditional teacher preparation classes creating opportunities to elevate skills beyond content areas of specialty to a more macro view of research-based practices in education. Teacher pedagogy reaches beyond content knowledge into the intricacies of effective instruction including lesson pacing, checks for understanding, differentiation, anticipating student struggles, and troubleshooting strategies (Shulman, 1986). Teacher Scholars are provided opportunities to marry subject matter knowledge like common content knowledge (CCK) with pedagogical content knowledge like knowledge of content and students (KCS), knowledge of teaching (KCT), and knowledge of curriculum (Loewenberg Ball et al., 2008). Scaffolded clinical experiences allow teacher candidates to have a safe environment to implement learning and reflect upon the outcomes with a supportive cohort group (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). Research shows that a teacher candidate's level of preparedness impacts their transition into the classroom regarding taking risks and trying new instructional techniques (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002).

A consistent supervisor provides a meter for growth throughout a teacher candidate's progress through a program (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). A teacher candidate's ability to meet regularly with a supervisor who functions as a mentor provides opportunities for individualized

scaffolding of learning, nonjudgmental, growth-oriented feedback, and emotional support (Parker et al., 2021). The stability of a faculty member allows developing teachers to have a point person to ask questions regarding planning, instructing, and assessing students along with navigating the job market and receiving emotional support (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). According to P. Hennissen, F. Crasborn, N. Brouwer, F. Korthagen, and T. Bergen (2011) study on pre-service teacher perceptions of mentoring, a teacher candidates finds value in a mentor being attentive to their needs, providing encouragement, giving positive feedback, synthesizing information, and summarizing feelings. Transitioning into a new learning environment is challenging and can become a breeding ground for self-doubt. Teacher candidates desire a mentor that will assist them in developing solutions to both personal and academic struggles as they elevate their skills in the field of education.

### ***Launch Longevity in the Profession***

Current studies find an increase in teacher turnover rates (Whitfield et al., 2021). The primary concerns with decreased longevity in education are the loss of historic instructional practices, a reduction in teacher pedagogy, and a rise in classroom management issues (Polizzi et al., 2015). Studies show that teacher preparedness impacts their self-efficacy (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). One predictor of teacher retention is an educator's level of self-efficacy (Polizzi et al., 2015). According to Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow, this self-efficacy is determined early and in many ways remains fixed throughout an educator's career (2002). One way to increase a teacher candidate's self-efficacy is through sufficient preparation which builds content knowledge and confidence in a new teacher (Polizzi et al., 2015).

The more opportunities a teacher candidate has to apply theory into practice followed by critical reflection, the higher one's confidence is in their abilities (McDonnough & Matkins,

2010). This confidence in early teaching creates a feeding loop of positive work experiences. Research indicates strong ratings of self-efficacy in novice teachers are linked to higher academic achievements in students: these academic strides increase a teacher's feelings of purpose and job satisfaction (McDonnough & Matkins, 2010). When a teacher candidate is well prepared for the classroom, they are more likely to accept a teaching position and stay in the profession longer (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). There is an expense to clinically rich learning opportunities, like the Teacher Scholars Academy, that scaffold and extend learning since the cost-benefits are actualized once these teachers are placed in classrooms. The front-end college costs produce higher quality teachers with more self-efficiency and increased long-term retention rates reducing spending to recruit and train new teachers (Ellerbrock et al., 2018).

### ***Brain Drain***

Access to high-quality teacher candidates and retention of local talent continues to persist in Nebraska. According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond's (2019) study, the Midwest has the second highest turnover rate in urban and suburban districts. Furthermore, the isolation of rural communities keeps these regions from having access to the same pool of teacher candidates (Goodpaster et al., 2012). However, once a Midwest rural community recruits a teacher, they tend to retain them. Midwest rural districts have the second lowest attrition rate at 9.6% in comparison to the highest rates in the South at 14.7% (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Three Nebraska State universities are using current research to bolster teaching through innovative new programming options. This is because teacher candidates who receive a high level of support, along with opportunities for guided reflection, are more likely to stay in teacher education programs and be retained once they have a classroom (DeAngelis et al., 2013). These

findings are promising for increasing retention rates in teaching; however, they may not transition into the Nebraska educators' job market. A teacher candidate's decision to teach within the state they attended college is largely dependent on factors outside of the university system's control. Novice teachers entering the job market are acutely aware of student loans and debt. If student loans are not a factor, new teachers may be less concerned with their starting salary; however, they still have strong emotional ties and comfort in what is familiar (Moller et al., 2018). A majority of new teachers accept teaching positions within a small radius of where they grew up and attended primary and secondary school (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017).

Other factors that determine where a teacher chooses to accept a teaching position are the availability of affordable housing, distance to amenities, and the sense of belonging they feel in the community (Moller et al., 2018). Furthermore, the impact of a strong teacher preparation program can fade with time. Teacher preparation programs have a direct impact on the teacher pipeline especially in novice teachers mobility and attrition rates during their first few years teaching. According to Goldhaber and Cowan's (2014) study on Excavating the Teacher Pipeline, the impact of a strong teacher preparation program is observed at the beginning of an educator's career and reduces over time as professional experiences replace evocations of theoretical and practicum coursework.

## **Methodology**

This program evaluation focuses on teacher candidates' individual and shared experiences within the first cohort of the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Teacher Scholars Academy (TSA). The program evaluation aims to decipher the Teacher Scholars Academy's key elements and interpret the value TSA scholars attribute to these experiences (Merriam, 2009).

### *Participants, Setting, and Context*

To be considered for the Teacher Scholars Academy (TSA), students must apply during their senior year of high school and meet the selection criteria of enrolling and progressing through an approved teacher preparation program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Recipients must be full-time students and maintain a 2.75 grade point average. These incoming freshmen are placed in a TSA cohort group and engage in intentionally curated academic classes, seminars, and activities. For purposes of this program evaluation, only the Teacher Scholars Academy Cohort 1 is represented since they completed all four years of the academy.

In its inception, the 2019 Teacher Scholars Academy Cohort 1 had 24 students from 21 Nebraska high schools. The awarded scholarship applicants pursued degrees in elementary, secondary, and special education. At the time of this study, the retention rate of TSA Cohort 1 is 87.5% with 21 Teacher Scholars. The three students that withdrew cited a change in majors to Business, Psychology, and Public Library. The Teacher Scholars' demographics include 18 females and three males. Participants' ethnicity breakdown is one Black/Asian, one Hispanic/White, and 19 White. Fifteen Scholars are enrolled in honors and three are first-generation college students. Table 1 represents TSA Cohort 1 major/endorsements. Of the 21 students that remained, 14 of the Teacher Scholars engaged in the program evaluation resulting in a 66% participation rate. Not all Cohort 1 Teacher Scholars are graduating in Spring 2023, yet every participant in the study has completed the TSA program requirements. For this report, focus group data is aggregated and pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identities. Additionally, participants' program evaluation survey responses did not include the collection of personally identifiable information.

**Table 1**  
**Teacher Scholars Academy Cohort 1 Major/Endorsements**

TSA Cohort 1 Major/Endorsements n = 21			
ELED	5	SED - ENG/SPAN	1
ELED/ESL	1	SED - French/ESL	1
ELED/SPED	3	SED - LA	2
ENG/ESL	1	SED - SOC. SCI.	2
ENG/LA	1	SOC. SCI.	1
SED	1	SPED	1
SED - Art	1		

***Data Collection***

The survey used for this study is an adaptation from annual surveys given to Teacher Scholars. A total of 14 participants responded to Likert scale and open-ended program evaluation questions. These questions fell into the following categories: Teacher Scholars Academy (TSA) academic experiences, TSA community engagement, Teacher Education Department (TED) educational experiences, mentorship, college engagement, future employment, and long-term goals. A snippet of questions is below:

1. Overall, how satisfied are you with your experiences as a Teacher Scholar?
2. Additional comments about your Teacher Scholar experience.
3. Overall, how satisfied were you with the TSA seminar meetings?
4. Additional comments about the TSA seminar meetings.

The program evaluation also included focus group interviews with Teacher Scholars. Just like the survey, participation in the focus group was voluntary. Four focus groups were conducted with 14 total participants in attendance. The focus groups were facilitated by two

researchers who shared in the questioning, observing group dynamics and body language, and the notetaking of participants (Savin-Baden & Major, 2022). These focus groups occurred in a secure digital Zoom room with video recording and live text transcription. Teacher Scholars agreed to the recording for data collection purposes. All personal identifying information was removed to protect participants' anonymity prior to publication. During the cleaning process, researchers implemented intelligent transcription where dialogue related to the content remains; however, filler words and grammar are resolved to increase readability (Saldaña, 2021).

A team of three researchers developed semi-structured interview questions that fell into three categories: engagement, exploration, and exit questions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2022). This confirmatory research technique sought directional information from Teacher Scholars so questions are rooted in feelings and perceptions (Miles et al., 2020). Teacher Scholars did not receive questions in advance to ensure that their responses would be in real-time and unfiltered (Savin-Baden & Major, 2022). To ensure reliability, interview questions underwent a critique and editing process by various stakeholders. The focus group interview questions are below:

#### Engagement Questions

1. When did you first think about becoming a teacher?
2. Who taught you? (Who was the teacher that inspired you, what sticks in your mind?)

#### Exploration Questions

3. Your teaching identity: How do you want your future students to describe you?  
Where did you learn that?
4. Which course do you view as most helpful in preparing you for the classroom?  
(Meaning: Where have you had the biggest Ah-ha moments)

5. What are the biggest takeaways from Instructional Coaching in your practicum classes? Is there anything you would change?
6. In your TSA programming which course was the most challenging, and what made it the hardest? Which course was the most fun? What made it the most fun?
7. How do you describe TSA to others?
8. How have you gotten to know other preservice teachers outside of TSA?
9. How would you compare/contrast your experience in TSA with peers not in the program?
10. The pandemic has been an aspect of your college experience. How has the pandemic impacted you as a student and teacher candidate?

#### Exit Questions

11. What haven't we asked that you would like to share to help us fully capture your input for the TSA program?

#### ***Data Analysis***

The research team used a mixed methods approach to find congruences and variability in survey results and focus group responses. For every survey question, the Likert scale rating counts are compiled and calculated to determine mean, standard deviation, and variance. A combination of deductive and inductive coding strategies is used to analyze focus group transcripts. A top-down approach guided the researchers in their first round of open coding. Teacher Scholars' responses fell into three deductive coding categories: TSA benefits, TSA improvements, and no code. The designation of no code indicated the response aligned with pre-service teacher identity and is beyond the scope of this current research; however, it will be studied at a later time. For the following rounds of coding researchers used a ground-up approach

with both thematic analysis coding and selective coding (Saldaña, 2021). With this inductive approach, meta-themes emerged within TSA benefits including support, resume/job, professional network, financial, and TSA classes/meetings. The following meta-themes materialized within TSA improvements including changes for the future, honors, TSA classes, and COVID related. The codes with the highest frequency necessitated further data analysis in which new trends surfaced and nested sub-codes were created (Miles et al., 2020). For example, the parent code of TSA Benefits, sub-code Support, and nested sub-codes for Dr. Huber and a nested sub-code for TSA Cohort Peers.

To increase the reliability and stabilization of coding all documents, the researchers developed a codebook. All parent codes, sub-codes, and nested sub-codes received a memo with descriptors and examples to increase clarity and resolve discrepancies through the coding process. For intercoder reliability, both researchers coded data together for dependability and to decrease bias (Saldaña, 2021). Through the examination of codes, researchers conducted a negative case analysis regarding contradictory findings related to honors classes being described as a benefit and an area of improvement for the TSA program (Savin-Baden & Major, 2022). The following sections will highlight results from the program evaluation and a discussion of Teacher Scholars' perspectives on the benefits and areas of improvement for the TSA Program.

## **Results**

An exploration of survey results (Table 2) and focus group responses (Table 3) shed light on the Teacher Scholars Academy program's impact on cultivating highly-qualified teacher candidates.

**Table 2**  
TSA Qualtrics Survey Results

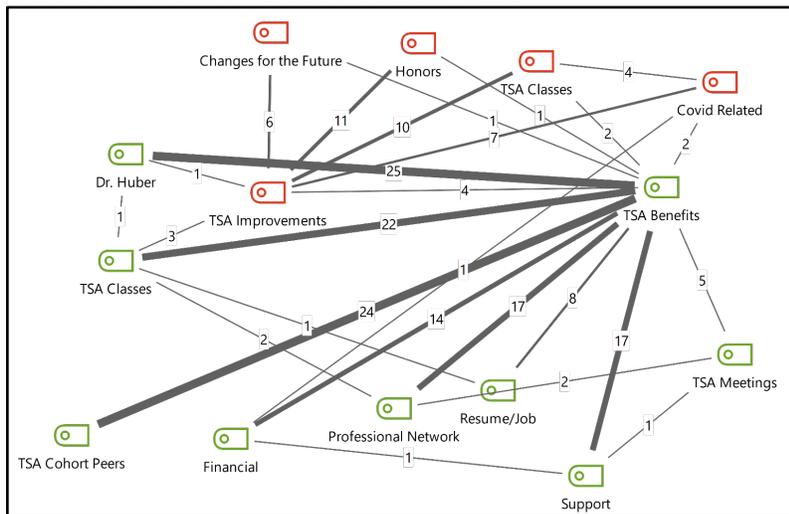
TSA Qualtrics Survey Results n = 14							
Question	1 Extremely Dissatisfied	2 Somewhat Dissatisfied	3 Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	4 Somewhat Satisfied	5 Extremely Satisfied	Std. Deviation	Mean Out of 5
Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience as a Teacher Scholar?	-	-	-	14%	86%	.35	4.86
Overall, how satisfied were you with the TSA seminar meetings?	-	-	7%	43%	50%	.62	4.43
Overall, how satisfied were you with the Honors program?	14%	50%	14%	7%	14%	1.24	2.57
Overall, how satisfied were you in collaborating with CADRE associates?	-	-	14%	29%	57%	.73	4.43
How satisfied were you with the university and college-sponsored groups and extracurricular activities?	-	-	21%	21%	54%	.81	4.36
How satisfied were you with your Director support?	-	-	-	-	100%	0	5
How satisfied were you with your Advisor support?	7%	7%	7%	43%	36%	1.16	3.93
How satisfied were you with your CEHHS instructors?	-	-	-	50%	50%	.5	4.5
How satisfied were you with your CEHHS classes?	-	-	-	71%	29%	.45	4.29
How satisfied are you with peer mentoring support?	-	7%	57%	14%	21%	.91	3.5

**Table 3**  
TSA Program Evaluation Code Frequency Table

Summary of TSA Program Evaluation Focus Group Responses	
Code System	Frequency
TSA Benefits	56
• Support	17
○ TSA Cohort Peers	24
○ Director: Dr. Huber	28
• Resume/Job	8
• Professional Network	17
• Financial	14
• TSA Classes	28
○ TSA Meetings	5
TSA Improvements	22
• Changes for the Future	7
• Honors	11
• TSA Classes	13
• COVID Related	22

The interconnection of responses are depicted in the TSA Code Co-Occurrence Context Chart (Figure 1). The thickness of the line indicates the strength of the relationship between the two codes. A numerical value splits the line to quantify the number of times the codes are assigned within the same context. The most co-occurrences are between Dr. Huber [the program director], TSA cohort peers, and TSA classes.

**Figure 1**  
TSA Code Co-Occurrence Context Chart



### ***Program Structure for TSA Teacher Candidates***

**Teacher Scholars Academy (TSA) Program.** Survey results indicate that 86% of recipients are extremely satisfied and 14% somewhat satisfied with their Teacher Scholars Academy experiences with a standard deviation of 0.35 and a mean of 4.86 out of 5. Within focus group data, themes emerged related to Teacher Scholars experiencing enriched learning opportunities through classes and seminars that extended their learning beyond a typical teacher candidate. During focus groups, Teacher Scholars recounted what TSA means to them:

I describe it to my peers as a Scholarship Academy that allows me to excel as a future educator with peers who have the same passion as me, and it's guided by educational leaders in our community who truly care about the education field and about future teachers. (Teacher Scholar Jamie, 2023)

If somebody asked me what TSA is, I start out with it's been a really big gift in my life. I explain it's just a program within the College of Education with a select group of high-achieving students who take the same courses as normal future educators. But we also get extensions of professional development. And we get leadership training. And we get to work with grad school associates and educational leaders to really just take what we're learning and kind of like the normal requirements and like taking it a step further. I also explained it's just a really great community of future teachers to kind of network with, and just build relationships with people, that you know will be consistent through college. (Teacher Scholar Taylor, 2023)

I can't think of a better way to describe TSA, but as a blessing and a gift, because it has truly been that in my life. Once again, like adding on to Taylor, being able to leave college debt-free has lifted such a weight off my shoulders and to know that I will be leaving, not only without debt but with a group of friends and relationships with other educators that will last hopefully for a lifetime. (Teacher Scholar Riley, 2023)

**Communication Studies Course.** Focus group data analysis depicts the benefit of intentionally sequenced classes for TSA cohort students. Although a Teacher Scholar mentioned their unease with public speaking at the start of their first fall semester, a majority of the participants described Communication Studies as a course that taught skills and laid the foundation for a strong community within Cohort 1.

I would say my most challenging TSA class was that speech class. I think, simply because I am a little bit more introverted, and I got it was my first semester of college, and I got placed into this room with 24 strangers, and I was like, what do I do now? (Teacher Scholar Riley, 2023)

It's just a really easy avenue to make some quick friends your first semester of college. And I think having that class really set up friendships and relationships for all of college. So it was really fun to be able to interact with people in my cohort. And just kind of preview what the next 4 years would be like with them doing seminars and all the developments that we've had. And we also had a really good professor as well to keep it a very fun environment. (Teacher Scholar Taylor, 2023)

**Human Relations for Bias-Free Classrooms Course.** The Human Relations for Bias-Free Classrooms stretched Teacher Scholars with a collaborative Redefine the Redline Project. Due to the magnitude of the assignment and COVID in Spring 2020, students expressed mixed reviews due to factors related to their first large research project, completing a task with elementary students, and navigating COVID.

I think, having that unique red-lining experience was a lot of fun. And it was really valuable for my teaching as well and just informing me what I know about Omaha. (Teacher Scholar Avery, 2023)

I think the most challenging one was our Human Relations course, and I only say that because that is the semester COVID hit, and having to transition because we were doing a huge service learning project with fifth graders from an elementary school, and so having to move all of that virtual was very difficult because it wasn't just with other college students, but having to set up a time with fifth-grade students as well, it was very hard, and just trying to figure out how to best present and still meet all the requirements, because it was supposed to kind of be a balance of college students and fifth-grade students presenting. ... And I think the transition was really difficult. (Teacher Scholar Taylor, 2023)

The Human Relations with the fifth graders at that elementary school was the most challenging because it was a different format of a class than I've ever experienced. I hadn't done service learning. So I felt like that was a little bit difficult for me to wrap my mind around just because I had been used to like my one semester of college courses being so like lecture heavy almost, and then that was kinda like an inquiry-based, like here's your topic, go do some research, go collaborate with others which I really enjoyed, but it was just difficult for me to wrap my head around it. (Teacher Scholar Jamie, 2023)

**Foundation of Leadership Development Course.** In the Foundation of Leadership Development course, Teacher Scholars partook and found value in self-reflection to determine their leadership style and establish career aspirations.

It was challenging, you know because you really had to dig deep into who you are and what your beliefs are, and where you stand. But with that, you know, it's fun to kind of figure yourself out and see how it is gonna shape how you become an educator. So, you know, I found that challenging cause I'm not someone who likes to dive deep into my thoughts and feelings. But I learned more about how I'm going or how I can use those thoughts and beliefs to make me a better educator. (Teacher Scholar Sawyer, 2023)

**TSA Seminars.** A synthesis of participants' Likert scale results, survey comments, and focus group responses indicate that Teacher Scholars found seminars and professional development opportunities to be advantageous. Teacher Scholars' satisfaction with TSA seminar meetings is 50% extremely satisfied, 43% somewhat satisfied, and 7% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with a mean of 4.43 out of 5 and a standard deviation of 0.62. Themes emerged in focus group data related to seminars creating enriching experiences, extending learning, and providing networking opportunities. Teacher Scholars found value in expanding their toolbox as an educator. Teacher Scholars mentioned the impact of these professional development seminars, led by local educational leaders, benefiting them during job interviews and practicum experiences. Lastly, the TSA seminars continued to foster a culture of community amongst Teacher Scholars as they progressed through coursework and had fewer classes together as a cohort.

I definitely feel like we have more experience. And we are definitely going into job searches and the overall career field as a whole ahead of our peers. Because of the experiences we've had with our seminars, the CADRE associates and staff members that we've worked with that have been extensions of everything that we've already learned during our courses that are required. So I just feel like we overall shine a little bit more. A little brighter, especially since I've gotten that feedback back from some job interviews that I've had as well that they're just overall very impressed with our TSA cohort, and how we stand out compared to our peers. So I feel like we are going into our field a little

bit more prepared because of those extra things that we've been given and opportunities that we've taken. (Teacher Scholar Jamie, 2023)

I would say a big thing that I feel like I've gained from it, than maybe my other education peers have, is like references and contacts that I now have, just connections. Like we had the job fair, and I was able to just add on my resume TSA. And that was a great conversation starter and really stuck out to a lot of districts. Additionally, that helped me get connected with my student teaching because we worked with different schools. (Teacher Scholar Cameron, 2023)

We get to work with grad school associates and educational leaders to really just take what we're learning and kind of like the normal requirements and like taking it a step further. (Teacher Scholar Taylor, 2023)

I think it was just kind of a good space and time to like to reconnect with each other, and having, like a check-in, making sure everyone's like doing okay. (Teacher Scholar Amari, 2023)

**Honors.** 71% percentage of TSA Cohort 1 Teacher Scholars are on track to graduate with honors. In this program evaluation, the greatest amount of variation occurred in the Teacher Scholars' perspective of honors classes being beneficial. Survey results indicate 14% are extremely satisfied, 7% are somewhat satisfied, 14% are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 50% are somewhat dissatisfied, and 14% are extremely dissatisfied. These results have a mean of 2.57 out of 5 and a standard deviation of 1.24. During the focus group interviews, participants responded with mixed reviews regarding the benefits and drawbacks of honors classes. Teacher Scholars suggested that the application include more detailed information about what it means to be an honors student. A few scholars did not see value in the honors extension projects nor the benefit of listing honors on a job resume. Other Teacher Scholars mentioned a positive honors experience and found taking honors classes to be a minor requirement for receiving a full-ride scholarship.

I will say my honors experience didn't align with my education goals like teaching goals. And so that was sometimes a little bit frustrating to just spend a lot of time on these honors assignments and ... a lot of effort was put into those when it wasn't super related

to teaching, which wasn't TSA's fault. It was just more of an added element. (Teacher Scholar Cameron, 2023)

If honors are gonna be a requirement, make it more relatable to what I'm doing. ... I mean, of course, graduating with honors is something that's good on a resume as a teacher. You know, I feel like there are other things on my resume that are more beneficial, and honors not necessarily helping me to become a better and better educator. In my opinion, I'm not going to graduate with honors. I ended up dropping out of the honors. Just for that reason, you know, I would have had to. So, my first year and a half I spent on the baseball team at UNO and so, my credit load looked a little different, and if I was going to graduate with honors, I would have had to take an extra semester as well. So that's something I didn't wanna do. I wanted to graduate in four years. (Teacher Scholar Sawyer, 2023)

I felt like the only thing that people could tell me about why I should stay in honors is that it would look good on a resume, and for me that wasn't a good enough reason. (Teacher Scholar Parker, 2023)

So I just think, maybe just emphasizing more that you do become a part of the honors program when you are accepted, but also emphasizing, like maybe your first or second semester, that you are not required to stay in the honors program and just kind of not putting the pressure to stay in. I don't think there was ever pressure to, but I think just putting it out there more. It's okay if you do drop out. If it's just kind of too much, because there are a lot of requirements to me, and there's a lot of high expectations. And especially once you get to your last semester with student teaching, kind of the big final project on top of everything else that's expected. If I did not have TSA, I don't think I would have applied for the honors program. (Teacher Scholar Taylor, 2023)

My honors classes have extended my learning a lot, and I'm really grateful for that. (Teacher Scholar Riley, 2023)

This is kind of like the one requirement of being in TSA is to be in honors, and that is the least I can do. Yeah, if they're asking me to be in honors, and they are also just giving so much into my education. And that's the least I can do is to also be a part of honors. (Teacher Scholar Skylar, 2023)

### ***Interpersonal Support and Relationships***

**TSA Director Support.** Teacher Scholars unanimously responded that they are extremely satisfied with the support they received from the TSA Director. In focus group responses, themes appeared in regard to having a consistent mentor over the past 4 years in

college who provided academic guidance, socio-emotional counsel, encouragement, and affirmations.

Dr. Huber has been there since the day we accepted the scholarship, and to the day we graduate as a mentor, as a guide, as a support, and so, having that consistency kind of like another advisor was, I think, also just something that stuck out that is not like a lot of our peers. (Teacher Scholar Taylor, 2023)

She has been consistent because we've all touched on how scary going to college is! And how life-shattering that is, in a way. But having an adult figure who not only has the experience in the field that you are learning about, and the experience to teach other people about the field, she is just so compassionate and really eager to teach a new generation of teachers. (Teacher Scholar Rowan, 2023)

We've all touched on it. How great Dr. Huber is. But I don't think we've given her enough praise, because she did help me a lot through everything. Honestly, I know she's helped each and every one of us, in different ways throughout this experience. I know it's gonna be different without her cause she's retiring. I think she's just been something consistent in this crazy, inconsistent time. That's been important to me. (Teacher Scholar Avery, 2023)

**CADRE Associate Support.** A majority of the Teacher Scholars found value in collaborating with CADRE associates with 57% extremely satisfied, 29% somewhat satisfied, and 14 % neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with a mean of 4.43 out of 5 and a standard deviation of 0.73. Teacher Scholars referenced these CADRE associate experiences impacting their decision to pursue a master's degree in the near future.

Also being able to build relationships with educational leaders in the community. Whether that be other instructors, coaches, CADRE associates, and the people we've worked with through service learning like I have valued those relationships throughout my 4 years here. (Teacher Scholar Riley, 2023)

Just more opportunities to just be involved, and I think, especially with the CADRE Associates. I was accepted into the CADRE program for next year, and I think it just really was a benefit, because all of the associates, I now know they know my name, and so they recognized me through the application process. And then going into next year working with them like I'll already have that connection with a lot of them because they lead our seminars. (Teacher Scholar Taylor, 2023)

**Cohort Support.** As a collective group, Teacher Scholars found value in the support and mentorship that the cohort dynamic provided.

It is one of the best things to ever happen to me cause it put me into a very nice and welcoming community during such a change in life because going from high school to college is different. Very different. But I had a community that helped me, and that was there for me, which was very nice. (Teacher Scholar Blake, 2023)

Teaching is such a roller coaster, I mean, especially through college. So the biggest difference is having a group of people that you're comfortable enough to share different stuff about than you would in a normal classroom. (Teacher Scholar Sawyer, 2023)

The community aspect of again having 24 people you can lean into. And we had a group chat. So, you know, if we ever have a question, we can always ask each other, which is super nice. (Teacher Scholar Arden, 2023)

I'd say something similar, I think, having the community aspect was probably the most important for me, especially as a freshman, and coming into college cause...And it's always really nice for like, if you're going through hard times, to know someone in your classes. If you're just not getting something, you always have someone there who you can just send a quick text to. (Teacher Scholar Rowan, 2023)

I would say it just gave me more of a family on campus, and that's important to have like a family that actually cares for you and is rooting for you, whereas other students who are not in TSA and are going to school, they don't have that home base really that they can come back to. (Teacher Scholar Skylar, 2023)

I don't think there's a single person in the whole group that you could not go to with a problem that wouldn't be willing to help you. And I think that's really rare for other programs. (Teacher Scholar Casey, 2023)

**Interpersonal Support.** Teacher Scholars referenced the impact of interpersonal support and relationships in retaining them during the hardships of transitioning from high school to college, personal trials, and COVID struggles.

Without TSA I would have dropped out of school. I think having not only financial support like Avery said, but having a community, I think it is really important to me. ... I'm not really an extroverted person, so I think I kind of just keep myself. But having this support I know I can always rely on is super helpful. (Teacher Scholar Amari, 2023)

And yeah, I have definitely thought about quitting school so many times throughout these years, especially because getting through school with COVID was really tough. But then I would think, "Wow! I have such an amazing opportunity here, and I would be silly to

give that up." And then it's nice to know that other people in your group are going through the same thing and that you're all just getting through it together. And there's an end in sight that you can really feel. And yeah, there's just something about having that little social group or cohort. Yeah, literally, a cohort who, you know, you're going to see them at least once a semester. Now, even if you don't see them too often anymore, or talk to them outside of classes, or seminars and stuff like - it's always nice to know that they're always still going to be there. (Teacher Scholar Rowan, 2023)

**Financial Support.** The scholarship aspect of the Teacher Scholars Academy impacted participants' perceptions of their ability to excel in courses. Teacher Scholars indicated that they could dedicate more time to classes because they did not need to work to pay for college. The scholarship made being a teacher more desirable and kept many from switching programs.

I mean in a practical way, it allowed me to go to college because of the financial support provided, it allowed teaching to make sense as a career for me because I wouldn't have to worry about some of the financial burdens afterward. (Teacher Scholar Cameron, 2023)

The financial side of things. I know a lot of people that I've met that aren't part of a scholarship group and are going for teaching. They really struggle with their studies because they're extremely busy with the workload that they have with lesson planning and working full time so they can pay their tuition, bills, and everything like that. So I think we got really lucky that we kind of have a cushion to give us a little bit extra time to really focus on what we're doing and making actually worthwhile to our students. (Teacher Scholar Casey, 2023)

So many teachers leave college in debt, and teachers, as we all know, don't have the highest salaries, so being able to leave college practically pretty much debt free, I think, is one of the biggest gifts of this program, because then it takes away that stress of having to take your first few years' paychecks and having to pay that back. It's just, it's a really great stress-free program. That allows you to really excel and not have to worry about money. (Teacher Scholar Taylor, 2023)

### ***Changes for the Future***

In regards to areas for improvement, Teacher Scholars mentioned honors requirements being better defined. Also, Teacher Scholars desired more in-person meetings as TSA students progress through their program, keeping the community rich with experiences. As these participants transition into classrooms they want to see future opportunities for former TSA

scholars to get involved and volunteer with the program. An example provided is to create opportunities for mentorship between TSA graduates and new TSA scholars.

But I do wish that we could get together more and have more seminars or social events on campus. I just think like those donors are investing a lot of money in us. And staff members are investing a lot of their support in us. We could do a few extra things to keep this scholarship and maintain it. But I might just be an overachiever, too. (Teacher Scholar Jamie, 2023)

But I know as a student, I think it'd be super cool to be in some sort of relationship with a former TSA member that's now teaching, some sort of mentorship, or something where you can meet up, I just think that would be so beneficial and maybe even having that involved in practicum experiences. I don't know. I just think it'd be cool if later on our skills could be utilized, or at least that'd be an option. (Teacher Scholar Cameron, 2023)

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This program evaluation focuses on the individual and shared experiences of the first Teacher Scholars Academy (TSA) cohort group to complete all of the program requirements. The study's goal was to unpack the Teacher Scholars survey and focus group responses to analyze and synthesize the impact of TSA on recruiting and retaining talented preservice teachers. Themes emerged related to the positive impact that TSA courses, seminars, and activities had on Teacher Scholars' professional development. Code co-occurrence provided context to the interconnected benefits of different facets of the TSA program. In particular, Teacher Scholars described the strengths in program course requirements, TSA community, and professional development. Results did indicate qualitative differences in how participants viewed the honors program requirement. Teacher Scholars described how these shared experiences will influence them as they transition into the classroom.

The intertwining of Teacher Scholars Academy goals, teacher preparation outcomes, seminars with CADRE associates, and mentoring experiences created a cohesive shared vision of developing exceptional teachers through meaningful learning experiences. Research suggests

that instituting a clear vision through program coherence allows teacher candidates to have a better understanding of their own teaching practices and makes them more likely to stay in the profession (Cavanna et al., 2022). Teacher Scholars' responses highlighted how TSA programming increased their knowledge of instructional practices making them feel more prepared for the classroom. Participants referenced having a greater understanding of the realities of teaching along with developing the necessary tools to persevere and thrive.

Overall, the analysis of honors classes revealed differences in Teacher Scholars' perceptions of the requirement. Specifically, there is a variance in the benefits of honors assignments on learning. Some Teacher Scholars found these assignments to extend learning while a majority did not see value in the additional work required of them. Not only did participants not see a direct correlation between honors requirements and skill development for teaching, but Teacher Scholars also did not find value in including honors on their job resumes. A suggestion for program improvement is to clearly define what the expectations are for TSA scholars in taking honors classes.

Teacher Scholars responses repeatedly described how the support of the director and the TSA cohort group enriched their learning experiences and retained them during trying times in college. Teacher Scholars' responses confirm P. Hennissen, F. Crasborn, N. Brouwer, F. Korthagen, and T. Bergen (2011) findings that teacher candidates value having a mentor that will cultivate them as novice teachers and emotionally support them as they transition into the field. The Teacher Scholars described the TSA Director, Dr. Huber, as a mentor during their four years in the program. The data depicts a strong connection between TSA benefits and the guidance provided by the director. The continuity and consistency that the director provided kept Teacher

Scholars actively engaged during the shifts in college and played an essential role in retaining two teachers who considered quitting.

Similarly, Teacher Scholars found the cohort community to be of value as they navigated teacher preparation classes. Comparable to C.R. Ellerbrock, E. Vomvoridi-Ivanovic, and J. Duran's (2018) findings, Teacher Scholars' responses highlight the need for support in understanding class assignments, unpacking feedback, and reflecting on the practice of teaching. Participants referenced the encouragement, clarity, and unity that their cohort peers provided as they progressed through challenging coursework. Teacher Scholars view the cohort dynamic as a source of social connection as well. Many participants mentioned building lasting friendships with members of their TSA cohort group that have strengthened and grown over time.

In addition to supportive relationships within the TSA cohort, Teacher Scholars emphasized the importance of building a professional network with local educational leaders (Beswick & Fraser, 2019). Teacher Scholars' exposure to current topics in education, shared through the lens of professionals in the field, provided valuable insights that benefited them during practicum experiences and job interviews. One Teacher Scholar described how her experiences with CADRE associates impacted her decision to apply for the CADRE program and earn a master's degree. This is one example confirming how teacher candidates who receive high levels of support are more likely to accept positions within a radius of where they student taught (Moller et al., 2018). Based on Teacher Scholars' disclosures of accepted teacher positions, a majority of the teacher candidates desire to work in the metro area (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). At the time of this study, eight Teacher Scholars shared information regarding a secured teaching position for the 2023-24 school year. Teacher Scholars will work in the following districts: Bellevue Public Schools, Millard Public Schools, Papillion

LaVista Community Schools, Southern Schools, and Westside Community Schools. These districts are located in the following geographical regions: Douglas County, Gage County, and Sarpy County. Of the participants who responded, three Teacher Scholars have been accepted into the CADRE program and one Teacher Scholar is pursuing a master's in Curriculum and Instruction.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

As Teacher Scholars graduate and more data is available the following metrics will be measured: The number of TSA scholars who graduate and their demographics including GPA, time to completion, concentrations/endorsements (e.g., STEM, ESL, SPED, etc.), those from underrepresented groups, first-generation, out of state, etc. TSA graduate teaching placements (number and grade level/academic area) within Nebraska, other states, rural schools, and metro areas. In time, TSA will measure its progress toward goal 2 using the following metrics: Retention rates in the education profession for TSA graduates as compared to the national average; engagement of TSA graduates with the program to encourage retention and to serve as mentors; and the number of TSA graduates who pursue advanced degrees in education (e.g., curriculum and instruction, school counseling, school psychology, education administration, special education director, speech pathology, etc.).

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